

✖ When the Pacific Gas and Electric Company and California regulators confronted recent health and reliability concerns related to smart meters, they stumbled because of a failure to address these concerns upfront — before committing billions to statewide meter conversion. The loss of public confidence in the aftermath of the tragic gas pipeline explosion in San Bruno stems from a similar failure. Whether or not PG&E should have done more to guard against such accidents, the actions of both the regulators and the utility prior to the explosion leave people wondering if they are being adequately protected. The San Francisco Chronicle has been addressing these issues throughout its coverage of the explosion, including a new [report](#) today.

The formula ought to be simple. The utility should communicate its conviction to making safety its first priority, have in place the programs necessary to make this conviction a reality, and then demonstrate that it is faithfully and aggressively implementing that program. Regulators need to do the same. After all, what is more important — making sure that customers are safe in their homes, or getting that return-on-equity just right?

Ask individuals within either institution whether they care about health and safety and you will find out that they do. But somehow, those feelings don't translate into making safety "job one". For instance, take a look at the California Public Utilities Commission's annual reports over the last ten years and see what they have to say about ensuring the safety of the utilities' large natural gas transmission lines:

[2000-2001](#): "Performed 33 inspections of gas utilities and found 120 infractions." This may include transmission-level pipelines.

[2001-2002](#): "Performed 27 inspections of gas utilities and found 166 infractions." This may include transmission-level pipelines.

[2002-2003](#): "Performed 26 gas inspections and found 182 violations." This may include transmission-level pipelines.

[2003-2004](#): Nothing.

[2004-2005](#): "The CPUC enforces Federal pipeline safety standards under a contract with the U.S. Department of Transportation."

[2006](#): "The [staff] has been implementing the latest initiative to improve the safety of aging infrastructure with Transmission Pipeline Integrity Audits. These are audits of safety related maintenance and operations activities, in High Consequence Areas (HCAs). As the name

implies, these are areas where factors such as a high population density and large diameter high pressure pipelines combine to create a high level of consequences from any pipeline failure.”

[2007](#): Nothing. In fact, there is no reference anywhere to gas line safety of any kind (and by the way, never a reference to consumer gas safety ).

[2008](#): Nothing, beyond mentioning that the CPUC hosted a national pipeline safety conference.

[2009](#): Nothing. Here, there is actually a portion of the Safety section that focuses on gas distribution. However, there is no mention of gas transmission safety at all.

Regardless of how individuals within the agency might feel, if safety were the highest priority, wouldn't you expect to see it prominently discussed in the agency's annual report? Isn't it tough to convince the legislature that you need more inspectors on the payroll if this element of regulation only gets a throw-away line, or is not mentioned at all? And, after recognizing in 2006 that there was a particular need to improve aging infrastructure such as that in San Bruno, how come the agency says nothing more about it in its reports for the rest of the decade?

The CPUC is staffed with good people. Capable people. Caring people. But individuals don't get to set priorities. Those come from the very top of the agency — the same commissioners who are bombarded with lobbyists from utilities, big corporate utility customers, investment houses, and a modest number of consumer organizations. Where is the parade of lobbyists insisting on more careful attention to pipeline safety? Unfortunately, in this type of environment, it can take a tragedy to get everyone's attention.